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ABSTRACT

In this experimental orientation program, peer groups work with potential high school freshmen while they are still in the eighth grade, so that transition to high school will be easier. Groups consisting of two student leaders, and 10 to 15 eighth graders, meet for three 45-minute sessions, and engage in various orientation, visiting day, and open house activities. Feedback indicates that the program is helpful to both participants and to student leaders. Of the first years' participants 60% returned evaluation surveys, and 40% of them responded positively to the program. Of the 80% of the second year's participants responding, 66% had positive feelings about the program. (Author/JLL)

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"AN EXPERIMENTAL PEER GROUP ORIENTATION PROGRAM"

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Were our students having adjustment problems in their first year of high school? Returning freshmen with their stories of wonders, trials, enjoyments and disappointments made us wonder.

Were some of the traumatic accounts we heard due to changing suddenly from a small, unique, intimate Campus School environment where some of them had been for nine years? Perhaps expectations were too high for the 30 to 40 graduates from the Campus School as they blended with the 150 or more graduates from the town Middle School.

Administrators and teachers from both schools voiced a concern. A committee consisting of Rhoda Nemerofsky, Nurse, and Becky Fall, Physical Education Teacher from the Campus School and George Campbell, Science Teacher from the High School, developed a program to assist the students with a gradual introduction to their freshman experience. Research uncovered various orientation, visiting day and open house programs. These ideas were used to help formulate a plan. A program was developed in which peer groups worked with potential freshmen, while they were still in the eighth grade, so their initiation to high school would not be such a shock.

The program included former Campus School graduates who went through this adjustment phase, expressed a desire to help, and were Sophomores, Juniors or Seniors.

Mr. Campbell held three one hour classes with these ten volunteer student leaders. All committee members attended these classes so that input from all was possible. These classes included many topics relating to discipline, periods of silence, stereotyping, peer influence, planning,

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general group psychology and various other group process topics. Mr. Campbell's experience with Drug Abuse Programs and programs for students to speak out, was a marked advantage in developing these group leaders.

As planning and preparations progressed it was decided to have three 45 minute sessions with the prospective freshmen. Two student leaders and a group of about 10 to 15 eighth graders met in the Spring of the year just prior to graduation. The meetings were held in private rooms with no adult present. Questions, concerns and problems of the new entrants would be the chief points of discussion. However, the group leaders in their plans had prepared questions, stories, activities and comments they could insert. If the leaders felt a need, the meeting could be terminated at any point and the pupils returned to teachers standing by.

At the conclusion of each meeting the leaders individually, without the use of any names, tape recorded evaluations of the proceedings, problems, concerns and recommendations. These tapes were subsequently used in evaluation and planning. The leaders also immediately met with one of the teachers of the project for sharing concerns, problems and suggestions. In addition these student leaders attended a 30 minute meeting weekly during the project to deal with problems revealed by the transcripts, evaluation of the class meeting and techniques for the next presentation.

A high school visit was included in the planning. The afternoon visit included greeting and short reports from the administration, guidance personnel, student government officers and student representatives from all high school activities. The same student leaders who led the group discussions then took small groups for a tour throughout the building which ended with refreshments in the cafeteria.

This opportunity for upcoming graduates to relate to peers and visit the high school was enthusiastically supported by participants and leaders alike. Verbal accounts from students involved, faculty and committee members, as well as our follow-up discussions, led one to believe that the program was favorably accepted.

This feedback gave some indication that the program was meeting a need in providing a helpful service not only for the participants but the student leaders as well. To further substantiate the value of "An Experimental Peer Group Orientation Program," a follow up survey was included.

A year after the exposure all the freshman who participated in the program were surveyed. They were asked to anonymously respond to five questions to evaluate whether they felt the peer group introductory sessions made it easier to come to high school.

The questionnaire administered by the high school teacher, consisted of five questions so constructed that data could be collected and tabulated. The students recorded their responses by circling one of five degrees of choices ranging from number 1 (strongly agree) through number 5 (strongly disagree). A sixth question was included which requested any suggestions the students could offer for the improvement of the introductory program. Space entitled, "Additional Comments," was also provided for the students to utilize, which most of them did.

This program was planned to have a two year trial with a survey evaluation each year. The groups differed in number with the first exposed group having five more subjects. Sixty percent of the first year's participants returned their surveys and 48% of them responded positively to the introductory program. A second group was exposed to the same program but with different student leaders the next year. Of the 80% of participants responding 66% of them responded positively.

These results confirmed to some extent the positive verbal reactions relating that this introductory program was of value. It is possible that sophistication made the second year more successful than the first as the program except for leaders and participants was exactly the same.

At this writing, planning is underway to continue this program for another year.

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